

Plenary Panel Two: Collaboration and Friendship

Moderator: Ricia Anne Chansky

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Escape from the Colonial Asylum

David was a white Barbadian who died in the Barbados Mental Hospital in 1963 at age 46. Although making sense of his story is meaningful to me for personal reasons, I have wondered what interest other people might have in the story of this insignificant bystander to the march of history. Marlene Kadar has been my colleague and friend in battle over many years. I have listened to her presentations, read some of her writings, and worked with a few of her many students. But I am an insecure outsider in the field of life writing. I questioned her about the value of my research: “Well, you are doing it,” she replied, “so you need to do it!” I am still not sure what she meant, and I may not be quoting her correctly, but Marlene legitimated the academic study of life writing for me, and dragged me into the field, albeit still waiting for meaning to emerge. A trace in the Barbados Archives, a strange reference to Toronto, Upper Canada, led me to the Ontario Archives, located, coincidentally, in the same building as my own office. There I experienced what I can only describe as a Marlene Kadar moment. In David’s life and writings, his ambivalent white Creole romance of Englishness (see Lambert 2010) sat uneasily with his utopian embrace of West Indian decolonization. Postcolonial theorists have used the term melancholia to describe the affect associated with the failures of independence and the sacrifice of the postcolonial ideal to lingering colonial contradictions (Gilroy 2005). David was a melancholic, his life pre-figuring aspects of postcolonial melancholia. Unknowable to him was a silenced past (Trouillot 1995), hidden away in the archive: an ancestor, the son of a Barbadian planter, colonial legislator, and owner of enslaved persons, who had been diagnosed with “mania” following “insane attacks.” Committed by his own father to an institution in a distant land, the Toronto Asylum for the Insane, he would die there, his memory lost to his family. White Barbadian masculinity constructed itself historically as noble, immutable, and free. Trapped in itself, however, it returned to haunt its descendants in a “boomerang effect of colonization” (Césaire 1972). By reading David’s story and hospitalization in relation to his ancestor’s I hope, following Khanna (2003), to unleash from the archive the critical agency of melancholia revealed in the silences haunting the postcolonial nation. I am grateful to Marlene Kadar for providing the space for unleashing the silence.

Fuga do manicômio colonial

David foi um barbadiano branco que morreu no Hospital Psiquiátrico de Barbados, em 1963, aos 46 anos. Embora entender a sua história tenha um significado pessoal para mim, me perguntei que interesse outras pessoas poderiam ter na vida desse

insignificante observador do curso da História. Marlene Kadar tem sido minha colega, amiga e companheira de batalha por muitos anos. Eu ouvi suas apresentações, li seus escritos e trabalhei com alguns de seus muitos alunos. No entanto, sou um forasteiro inseguro no campo da escrita da vida. Eu a questioneei sobre a relevância da minha pesquisa: “Bom, você está pesquisando”, ela respondeu, “então precisa pesquisar!” Ainda não tenho certeza do que ela quis dizer e posso não estar citando corretamente, mas Marlene legitimou o estudo acadêmico de escrita da vida para mim e me arrastou para o campo, mesmo que eu ainda espere que o significado surja.

Uma pista nos arquivos de Barbados, uma estranha referência a Toronto, Norte do Canadá, me levou aos arquivos de Ontário, que se encontravam, coincidentemente, no mesmo prédio que o meu escritório. Lá eu vivenciei o que apenas posso descrever como um momento digno de Marlene Kadar. Na vida e nos escritos de David, sua romantização ambígua, crioula e branca, da anglicidade (Lambert, 2010) entra de forma conflitante com a sua visão utópica da descolonização das Índias Ocidentais.

Teóricos pós-colonialistas têm usado o termo melancolia para descrever o afeto ligado às independências fracassadas e ao sacrifício do ideal pós-colonial em função das duradouras contradições coloniais (Gilroy, 2005). David era melancólico, sua vida demonstrando aspectos da melancolia pós-colonial. Desconhecido por ele era um passado silenciado (Trouillot, 1995), escondido nos arquivos: um ancestral — filho de um agricultor barbadiano, legislador colonial e senhor de escravos — que havia sido diagnosticado com “mania”, após “ataques de loucura”. Internado pelo seu próprio pai numa instituição localizada numa ilha distante, o Manicômio de Toronto para os Insanos, onde morreu, sua memória esquecida pela sua família. A masculinidade do barbadiano branco se construiu historicamente como nobre, imutável e livre. Presa em si mesma, ela voltou para assombrar seus descendentes num “efeito bumerangue da colonização” (Césaire 1972). Ao ler a história de David e da sua hospitalização, relacionando-a com a de seu ancestral, eu espero – seguindo os passos de Khanna (2013) – extrair dos arquivos a presença da influência crítica da melancolia nos silêncios que assombram a nação pós-colonial. Sou grato a Marlene Kadar por proporcionar a oportunidade de quebrar o silêncio.

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